

FREEMASONRY – SHAPING DELAWARE HISTORY

As we approach the 200th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Delaware it is interesting to imagine what life altering decisions helped to shape our future, and to assume what may have transpired in the everyday life of our ancestor's in the latter years of the 18th and early years of the 19th centuries.

Two hundred years ago in the spring of 1803 Thomas Jefferson the 3rd President of the United States was midway through his first term and very instrumental in the expansion of the United States. In April of 1803 the United States negotiated a Treaty with France for the purchase of the Louisiana Territory for about \$ 15,000,000. The Treaty was dated April 30, 1803, signed May 2, 1803 and reached Washington on July 14, 1803. This was about a normal rate of travel in 1803 when a trip from New York City to Philadelphia took two days by stagecoach. We were also about to embark on a new era in transportation with the first successful voyage of Robert Fulton's steamboat, the Clermont. Some other significant events of that era, Napoleons armies were battling most of Europe, Congress passed a law banning the slave trade and Noah Webster published his first dictionary.

What significant events were shaping the Delaware Masonic future? In the spring of 1803 we might assume that some of the Brethren were in the process of planning for another attempt to form the Grand Lodge of Delaware. They surely had to be reviewing the results of the failure at the first attempt in 1786-87, the second attempt in 1794 and the third in 1797. By the standards of today this must have been a slow process to keep abreast of the issues. While the Brethren in Delaware are attempting to prepare an acceptable alternate presentation to form the Grand Lodge of Delaware, the President of the United States had instructed his personal secretary to explore a navigable route to the Pacific Ocean.

Approximately 900 miles west of Wilmington, Delaware, in St. Louis, Missouri, Brother Meriwether Lewis and William Clark will prepare for their journey and expedition west. Meriwether became the private secretary to President Jefferson in 1801 and both of them were interested in exploring a route to the Pacific Ocean. William was a close friend of Meriwether and both were as different as salt and pepper, what one lacked in a quality the other was strong.

When Jefferson took the Oath of Office on March 4, 1801, the United States consisted of 5,308,483 people within its boundaries, from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, from the Great lakes to an area north of the Gulf of Mexico, roughly 1,000,000 square miles. Only a fraction of the area was occupied as two-thirds of the population lived within 50 miles of the Atlantic Ocean.

Jefferson and many of his "Virginia gentlemen" were plantation owners who led lives of refinement and enlightenment on their vast estates. Other Virginia gentlemen, such as Meriwether Lewis, lacked the higher education and wealth of Jefferson's peers. Public Schools did not exist, so they were often educated by boarding with teachers, usually preachers or parsons, who would school them in grammar, math, natural science and Latin.

Since the country estates were so far apart, men such as Lewis acquired distinct wilderness survival skills, consisting of horsemanship, hunting and hiking. Not all men were content with plantation life, Lewis, like many sought a life of adventure. One means of finding it was by enlisting in the Army, where life was often spent on the frontier. Most of the soldiers and others who trekked through the frontier ended up in Tennessee or Kentucky, but some traders and trappers went as far as the Missouri River. The idea of migrating further west was unrealistic.

While three and a half million people lived within 50 miles of the Atlantic Ocean in 1803, only four roads crossed the Appalachian Mountains, that meant there were one and three quarter million people scattered throughout the boondocks. Of these there were only about a half million living west of the Appalachians. The United States had the potential to become a powerful nation if it could add the area west of the Mississippi to its territory. At that time, however, people were skeptical that one nation could govern an entire continent. At about this same period of time, you wonder if; some Brethren were skeptical about ever being able to form the Grand Lodge of Delaware.

The distance between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, the limited options of transportation, and the unanswered questions about the western land were barriers to westward expansion. Horses were the fastest mode of transportation, and the few roads and trails that were in existence, were in such a poor condition that it took upward of six weeks to ship anything between the Mississippi and the Atlantic seaboard.

One of every ten Americans who already lived west of the Appalachian Mountains felt they had found their own “national” interests. Since water routes were viewed as a source of commerce, many people along the Mississippi viewed themselves as the beginning of an independent nation that would tap into the world marketplace, not by going east to the Atlantic, but by going down the Ohio and Mississippi river system to the Gulf of Mexico. Kind of like an independent Grand Lodge of Delaware separating from neighbor Grand Jurisdictions.

Jefferson knew the inhabitants of this region posed a risk of secession from the United States. This nation was only 18 years old and everyone knew it was born out of rebellion, he was determined to obtain the vital trading port of New Orleans for the United States, in hopes of preventing the west from breaking away.

Jefferson had many ideas about the unknown areas westward. He was very interested in the region and his well read and personal library had more books on the subject than did any library in the world.

Some of Jefferson’s books described a landmass of erupting volcanoes and mountains of undissolved salt. Some of his books led him to believe that the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia might be the highest in the continent.

Sketches of land and creatures in the west came from the wild imaginations of men who had never been there. Many reports of the terrain sporting unicorns, woolly mastodons, seven

foot tall beavers and llamas all of which abounded in this uncharted land.

Maps were created by European geographers who supposed what the area might contain, they not having the slightest inkling of what the general area could sustain. Some drew California as an island, others showed the Rocky Mountains to be narrow and un-apposing. A map created for the Lewis and Clark expedition depicted only three points of known certainty, the latitude and longitude of the mouth of the Columbia River, St. Louis, and details of the then known area of the Missouri River up to the Mandan Indian village. Some unknowns this map contained were an estimate of how the Rockies might look and the course of the Columbia River, which no one had ever ventured or charted beyond its mouth.

But the area that lay between the Mandans and the mouth of the Columbia was blank. The best minds in the world could not fill in that blank until someone had walked the land, taken measurements and described the flora, fauna, rivers, mountains and people who inhabited the area. Equally important would be the observations and notations of the commercial and agricultural possibilities.

On January 18, 1803, President Jefferson sent a message to Congress, stating in part, "The river Missouri and the Indians inhabiting it, are not as well known as is rendered desirable by their connection with the Mississippi, and consequently with us." Jefferson went on to propose that an "intelligent officer with ten or twelve men might explore the whole line, even to the Western Ocean." At this same time what could our Delaware Brethren be proposing in order to establish our Grand Lodge?

Jefferson's proposal culminated his long-standing but quiet plans to send a trail-blazing expedition into the uncharted west. He viewed commercial growth in the west as the key to a United States stronghold in the region. Knowing there would be skeptics, Jefferson worded his message in a way that minimized military risks and used commercial gains as the bait. He made the temptation cheap, asking for only \$2,500 to fund the expedition. On February 28, 1803, Congress approved Jefferson's request.

Congress' approval of the journey was a big step forward, yet within months it would be eclipsed by an agreement that not only transformed the purpose of the expedition but the very destiny of the United States.

The Brethren of Delaware, in an attempt, to prepare documents that they hoped would lead to a successful plan for organizing The Grand Lodge of Delaware, were not aware of the negotiations being held in Paris, France. It began with a bid from the emissaries to buy the vital trading port of New Orleans, negotiations had gone nowhere until Napoleon Bonaparte, announced that the United States could have New Orleans if it would take the entire 820,000-square mile Louisiana Territory for \$15,000,000.

Amazed by the offer, Jefferson accepted and rushed the treaty through Congress. The treaty was signed on April 30, 1803. In a single move the United States was doubled. The purchase was not publically announced until July 3, 1803, Just two days before Meriwether

Lewis left Washington, D.C., for Pittsburgh to begin purchasing supplies and hiring men for the expedition. For Lewis this turned into a survey of American owned land.

And what a trip it was for the “Corps of Discovery”. Arriving at Camp Dubois, located on the west side of the Mississippi near St. Louis, Meriwether and his men endured the cold and blustery winter of 1803-04. They set out on May 14, 1804 on what Lewis felt would be a 8,000 mile round trip. Clark and his men joined up with them on May 20 and by the end of July they had traveled more than 600 miles.

It took another five months to reach the Mandan Indian country in what is now central North Dakota. There they built a fort-like log encampment amidst howling winds and falling snow.

In the spring of 1805 the party added a French Canadian trapper and his Indian wife, Sacagawea. Both served as guides and interpreters during the westward journey to the Shoshoni Indian country. The Shoshoni were Sacagawea’s people who supplied the expedition with horses to traverse the Bitterroot Mountains.

On November 17, 1805 the party reached the mouth of the Columbia River and saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time. There they built Fort Clatsop, near present day Astoria, Oregon. which sheltered them from the almost continuous winter rains.

During the spring and summer of 1806, after dividing the party, they made their way home by traveling different routes. This enabled them to explore twice as much area in the vicinity of the Continental Divide. They met on the Missouri River and continued the journey home, arriving in St. Louis on September 23, 1806, approximately two weeks before the meetings in Delaware.

In Wilmington the Brethren were preparing for the meetings that would result in the formation of “The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Ancient Free & Accepted Masons in Delaware

On June 6, 1806, in the Town Hall, Wilmington. Delaware, The Grand Lodge of Delaware was constituted under the leadership of Past Master, Jesse Green. Nine Brethren representing a majority of the lodges of Ancient York Masons were present.

June 7, 1806, thirteen Brethren met in the Town Hall, Wilmington and adjusted the three lodges under the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and the one lodge under the Grand Lodge of Maryland and formed, Washington Lodge No. 1, Wilmington. St, John’s Lodge No. 2, New Castle, Hiram Lodge No. 3, Newark and Hope Lodge No. 4, Laurel.

Thus we have some of the highlights that helped to shape our country and Grand Lodge as we enter these, the Bi-centennial years of both So Mote It Be.

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